

Avondale Mills Project

Interviewer: Edward Akin

Interviewee: Wallace Armstrong, at his home in Birmingham, AL

4/5/1981

E: This is an interview with Mr. Wallace at his home at 18 Shady in Avondale Mills Village in Birmingham on April the 5th, 1981. I want to get back over here. Mr. Armstrong, what I thought we start with is—is—do you have any stories? Did your folks tell you anything about where their families had come from before they got to Alabama or how they got here in the mill?

W: No. My—I was born [in] Jefferson, here in Birmingham, Alabama [on] July 4. I moved here when [I was] one year old. My father was—got a job in the mill. My grandfather was working here. I lived here 'till I was four. We moved to Siluria. Stayed nine months, came back to Birmingham. My father went back to work in the mill and, at six, my mother and father separated. And my mother wasn't able to work in the mill. We moved to my grandfather, out in Rocky Ridge. I stayed there until I was eleven. Moved back to Birmingham. And a year—approximately a year later, I left. Gone four years. Came back and did odd jobs. And then I went to work at Avondale in 1932.

E: Okay. Now, as you were growing up, you'd first mentioned Siluria. And reading through the *Avondale Sun* I noticed that must have been a strong connection for Avondale Mills. That a lot of the textile workers seemed to work both there and then they would come up here and work a while, and go back there.

W: I think the connection—you mentioned it—was textile work. If you worked at textile and you quit this textile, the only thing next you could go was textile.

E: Yeah.

W: And that was the closest.

E: Now, you said your granddad was also a textile worker.

W: Right.

E: Now, what was your grandfather's name?

W: William T. Armstrong.

E: Okay, and your father?

W: Thomas D. Armstrong.

E: Okay. And then, when your folks separated and your mother—y'all went out to live with your granddad. That would be her folks?

W: Her father, my mother's father.

E: What was her maiden name?

W: Howard.

E: They were Howards.

W: That—her father's name was J.M. Howard. He farmed.

E: Out at Rocky Ridge.

W: Right.

E: Which is not, of course, a part of surbia (??).

W: Well, it was then Birmingham, Route 4.

E: Yeah.

W: ...was called that.

E: But it was on out in the country, back then.

W: Right.

E: Now, you'd mentioned that at several points during your childhood, you came back to live in the village.

W: I didn't live in the village, some of the time. Close to it.

E: Now, was this with your mother?

W: Yes, with my mother.

E: Or with relatives? Did y'all stay with relatives?

W: No, with my mother. We got a house where we could find and afford ad then my mother done any work that she could get.

E: Yeah. Not necessarily connected with the mills.

W: It wasn't.

E: It wasn't with the mill.

W: No. Un-huh.

E: Now, did you have aunts and uncles working the village?

W: Yes, I had an uncle, had his brother was working there.

E: For instance, I—one of the Armstrongs I ran across quite a bit was Bud Armstrong. Was Bud of any relation?

W: Well, that—cousin. Bud Armstrong, Bud's father, and my father were brothers.

E: Yeah. Now, while—while y'all were here, you went... the times you stayed near here, you went over to Cunningham School?

W: Well, yes. I went to Cunningham School one year.

E: Now, then you said you came back working full-time with Avondale in '33.

W: Yeah.

E: Had you—had you worked at any time before that?

W: No.

E: ...with Avondale.

W: No, no.

E: So, you started, what? First of all, how did you get the job, 'cause this is in the middle of the Depression and I imagine jobs were hard to come by.

W: That's right, it was. Well, at this particular time, my mother was—I came here and stayed with my daddy; he was working here. I came up here and stayed with him. I went in each morning for eleven weeks seeking a job. And the job was just shaking his head, "nothing today." I'd come back. I hit the right spot when they needed a person, happened to be there at the time they needed him and he put me to work.

E: Yeah. Now, what did you start?

W: I started—well I guess you call it a "grease monkey." I had to grease. [I] put axle grease on the—the little cogs. I started that. I went to work on Friday and until noon Saturday on that job, greasing. Then, the next three weeks, I did anything that came along that was common labor. I'd take up quills, take off clothes, put out cloth, and just—just the common work. I did that. I believe then, a job came open, a regular job that you would go in, know what you was going to go from week to week. And that was doffing cloth, they called it. What, what it amounts to, when the loom rolls the cloth over and gets it in certain size roll, you take it off and then you put it on a truck and take it to the cloth room for inspection. And I did that for eight years. In the meantime, I had idle time to learn other thing and such as laying up warps, weaving, and so. I guess I become interested a little bit in some of the other jobs, of

the other job which, naturally, the next step up would be more pay, and I needed more pay. So, I wouldn't mind doing. My next job was laid up warps, what, you know, Wendy did that.

E: Yeah.

W: I laid up warps for a while. And I—then I got interested in learning to weave. And I practiced, practiced a good bit. Job come open for weaving, and so, they needed and put me on stand for looms.

E: Now, let—let me get some of the technical stuff straight here. Ah, quite often I would [come] across things in the *Sun* that would say so-and-so is a spare weave hand. Okay, what—what does that mean? Does that mean someone like you were talking about yourself, you know how to weave, but you're actually doing some other job?

W: No, un-huh, no. A spare is a person that is a weaver. It's all people that works on a regular job, they've got to be off certain days. They have to be off. If this weaver on this job is off, this person here that don't have a regular stand of looms will step in and run her job or his job while they're out.

E: Okay.

W: But the spare weaver, they called spare weavers because that's what they're doing. They're filling in for the regular weaver.

E: Now, would they tend to show up every day to find out if there was a job that day, or—

W: Oh, yeah.

E: Okay.

W: They would. And, I think most of the time that they was very little time the spare weaver didn't get to work because—

E: Somebody would be out sick or taking a few days off.

W: Right. Somebody would be off. And, too, well, let's say if they've got a spare weaver that hadn't—hadn't got to work two days, I mean, he's been off the full job they're running, everybody's been on the job, I'm saying for three days. The boss would go around and ask somebody to, didn't they wanted to be off to give this spare weaver an opportunity to make a couple of days in that way.

E: Now once, was being a weaver considered one of the better jobs in the mill?

W: Yes. It was.

E: Now, when you say you got a stand of looms, how many looms would you have?

W: Ah, sixty-five looms. I had to keep them sixty-five running all the time.

E: Yeah.

W: And, of course, you'll—others will tell you more about the waving than I will because I didn't do it as long as some of the others.

E: Like Willie Belle.

W: Right. Yeah. Right.

E: A few years.

W: Now, I—see, I only done—I only done weaving for a little, two years, a little over two and a half years, about two years.

E: Now, how would they determine production for weaving?

W: They had, well, they had pick clocks on the looms that rotated as the clock rolled, that rolled the pick clock and by the picks you would—they, they set the picks. For eight hours, they would have eighty picks for eight hours. And you supposed, that clock was supposed to show within ten points of that, you know, seventy to eighty. And, 'course, now there's times that was, the loom was stopped was beyond your control. When this warp gave out, they had to put another warp on it and maybe they didn't have that particular type that they wanted to go on, that loom would stand eight hours or so, and the clock wouldn't budge.

E: Yeah.

W: That was took under, they knew that.

E: Yeah, yeah. So, in other words, your major problem was to make sure that when it was running, it stayed running.

W: Right, right. Now, when a loom's running, you know, you got the threads coming over here, the shed. And what stops the loom, one of these threads, you got a thousand threads coming over the warp, one of them threads will break. When it breaks, it's got a drop wire and it drops down and it stops automatically.

E: Right.

W: And then, you find that, tie it, and pull it through. You pull a lever on it to stop back.

E: How rapid a process is it?

W: To do that?

E: Right.

W: Oh, it takes you, for, to find the thread and tie it and pull it in, take you a minute.

E: Good eyesight.

W: Well, I mean, not every time. But normally, because it's something that's like... you pick up a book and start to read. How long you take for you to pick that book up to get it up to your face and start reading.

E: Yeah.

W: And you've done it, much, and from that, it's automatically.

E: Yeah, but you were mentioning a thousand threads.

W: Yeah.

E: A thousand strands trying to find which one, and then tying it.

W: All right.

E: It would usually be hanging, though.

W: No. Un-huh.

E: No?

W: What you did, the drop wires was over the harness of the loom. Now, the harness went up and down like this and the drop wires over there. You had your hand across those wires and when—when at a certain point where that thread was broken, the drop wire there would be down. All right, these right close to it, where you—when you got up there, you got a stop there. What I'm saying, a stop if the drop wire that went up there, there's nothing. You got a stop and you know from that that that's where that thread is. And you reach, separate a little bit, reach in there and get that thread, tie your knot, and pull it through with your reed hook. You—you got a reed hook that goes through the harness, through that drop wire. You push, and then you pull it back out and you pull it through the weave, and that's all you do.

E: Now, did—I noticed back in the 20s that the person who had the highest production, the weaver, would get an additional two hours bonus every two weeks. Did this continue during the 30s, while you were weaving?

W: No.

E: Then, they even had one for loom fixers. I guess the guys must have put the money in, in the pot, and the fixer who had the lowest cost would get a free haircut.

W: That was an incentive for the fixers to do more, actually, work on what was on the loom than to just take that part off and put a new part on it. Now, repairing a car, you take a spark plug from a car, you can clean that plug, put it back in, and it's almost like new.

E: Yeah.

W: Same way with a loom. You could take some, some of the parts off and do a little repairing, put it back on, and—and that part may run six more months.

E: Yeah.

W: And that incentive for the fixers, now, the idea was that the less expense that this fixer used on his looms, you know, you know, I'm saying, the less cost it was to keep the loom running.

E: Right.

W: Then that was better for the company.

E: Now, you came on in '33. Did you come on right after NRA started?

W: I was working when NRA started. I went to work in '32.

E: Now, did they, was it when NRA came in that they added the second shift?

W: No, it was a little before NRA, approximately, maybe, wasn't by almost a year before, before the NRA.

E: I understand that caused some hard feelings over at the little mill.

W: Right.

E: The manager felt Avondale was getting his better help.

W: Right. True.

E: Now, what were some of the things you were doing outside the mill at that time, for recreation?

W: Ah, I can't—

E: Let's see. You were what? About eighteen when you started and you didn't get married for ten more years.

W: Right.

E: Must have been a lot of recreation going on.

W: Well, part of the time, well, I, now, I've always been a movie fan. And part of the time when I would get off from work, I'd go to a movie and then I went—summertime, I'd go to ball games and I had friends that I went out with and we would go, just to somebody's house. Well, we was, they was three of us, I had two more boy friends that—

E: Who did you run around with?

W: Well, Emmett Winn was one. And Emmett Winn—I'm blank now.

E: Okay.

W: But, what we would do, part of the time, we'd go get our dates and go to some house, now, a lot of times, we went to Toby's house, what about sister Toby, you know.

E: Toby, yes.

W: We'd go to our house. Now, Snoops was Toby's first husband. We was friends, we was close friends. And we would go to their house and we would—we'd carry a quart of oysters and they'd cook the oysters and say there'd be us three and Toby and her husband, would make the four couples. We'd play Rook and, well, they drank a little bit, just not too much, but a little bit. And, oh, we'd stay there until, oh, this was done mostly on Friday or Saturday nights and stuff.

E: Yeah, I understand for one thing, on the drinking thing you never went to work...

W: No, no.

E: ...in that condition.

W: No, no way. But, now that was one thing, like I mentioned, I went to a movie with friends and then ball game.

E: Another thing, since you didn't grow up in the village and you came in at eighteen, in a way, since your dad had worked in the mill, you were a part of the group. But on the other hand, you had not grown up with the kids who had grown up in the village. Did you—did you feel any type of tension between them and people who were coming in?

W: No.

E: Did they tend to be cliquish?

W: No, no. The only thing, now, the—I was close enough that, well, my age, part of the time I wasn't in the village, but I had, would see them enough to recognize, you know, still be known and things. That's makes sure that we wasn't strangers and I wasn't considered an outsider. But, as always, they's some little group that has their own groups that's—they don't take to, even though you grew up here, they've got their group and they don't want nobody in that. They—they know you, you'll speak to you and all, but, now, we ain't going to just run with you.

E: Yeah.

W: You understand that?

E: Yeah. Did that—was that just the way they were?

W: There was some, that was some, yeah, right, there was some of that. Well, the—around, well, I'm thinking now of, well, now, Robert Walker. Billy. It was Robert Walker, Warner Massey, Chester Moon, and Ed Franklin—those four was a partially in a little group. Now, they was dating and stuff and they, I

guess they was busy on their thing and there wasn't no shut off or anything, they was nice, speaking and everything like that, but, now, they was just doing their thing and I was doing mine.

E: Now, if I'm recalling, my recollection may not serve me well, but, that—weren't these also children of section hands and overseers?

W: No, no. Ed Franklin was.

E: Minnie Franklin's son?

W: No, Ed Franklin was Lutenis McGraw's brother and they was not, no foremen.

E: Was there any type—

W: Robert Walker was, his father was a loom fixer. He wasn't no kind of boss.

E: Yeah.

W: Warner Massey's mother, his father was, his mother and father was separated, and his mother was just a spinner and wasn't nothing—

E: Was there any type of—

W: No.

E: Well, was there any type of division between children of overseers and so forth—

W: Yeah, partially see, now John Moon had two girls and these girls was—it was their mother's fault—they wasn't allowed to date any of the boys that worked in the mill. She, uh, the boys that were working boys was under... not good enough. And the, uh, some of the others, well, off-hand, the other foreman's children was either grown or didn't have any.

E: Yeah. Now, what about during the 30s? Did you go to Camp Helen during that time?

W: Yes. First trip to Camp Helen was, I think, I'm not positive, I think it was in 1934. When it opened up, the old Camp Helen that was old Panama City and then when the war started, the government took that over. But the first trip that went, it was, the first trip for anybody in the mill to go and they had four buses. They got buses from Sylacauga using some of the Sylacauga school buses. They—we was to leave here at six o'clock, I think it was. I slept late that morning. I was only one going and with all the others, everybody loaded on the bus, there wasn't no checking or counting and that, you just, was Mr. Drigger was, he was in charge of the boys and Miss _____ (??) was in charge of the girls. Anyway, I missed the bus. Homer Butts down here, he, I run down there and the bus was going on. He told me [to] get in his car. He'd catch it. And I got in his car and we tried to run the buses—the buses must have been gone ten or fifteen minutes, I'm not for sure. And we caught the buses the first stop at Clara, the buses had to stop for something. I don't know what it was. I don't remember what the buses stopped, but when they stopped, I, he stopped when they did and I jumped out, run, got on the bus. Everybody [was] hollering, hollering "what was the matter," you know how it is. And so _____ (??) went on. At that time, we'd leave

here at six o'clock in the morning or thereabouts, and it would be four thirty before we got there to Panama because the buses that had governors on them and forty miles an hour was as fast as they'd run.

E: And the roads probably weren't as nice then as now.

W: Oh sure. You know, if the buses run forty miles an hour at top speed, then, I think—now, I'm not positive on that, but, you know, and we had to take the ten hours to. One thing that I like then: when you got on the bus, everybody was the same, and there was no big difference and they cutting up, singing, and just going on and having a ball and wasn't no—I don't think there was anybody that felt bigger than the other one.

E: Now, y'all'd, what, go down on a Monday and come back Friday or Saturday? Do you recall?

W: Most times we left on Saturday, Saturday morning, and come back the next Saturday.

E: What were some of the things you did once you got there? What were some of the activities, formal and informal?

W: Well, most of the stuff that we did—first run up and down the beach, and going—go out in the Gulf and go in swimming. Some of them that wanted to fish, they got their fishing equipment and went out fishing. And that was in the day time. And you would run around and just ____ (??) see what you could see and do. 'Course, sun was hot after—from eleven o'clock on, you got in the shade as much as possible, and 'course, you got breakfast, too. But you got your lunch, and after lunch 'till two o'clock, you went back to your bunk and just laid down, relax for a couple of hours or something or other and if you wanted to. And if you're dating, you go to your girl if she's there. You get with her instead of—and, at the time, that's what I was doing. And that time, that's what I was doing: dating. And at night after supper, well, you eat at five o'clock. The rec hall started up at seven o'clock. Well, the soon as you eat, you head for your bunk and you take a shower and shine up and get ready to go over there because in the rec hall, they had the grand march and then ____ (??) after that was over the little _____ (??) games that they had planned, you played with that and then the dancing, started dancing at eight thirty, nine o'clock and danced 'till twelve. And I loved that. 'Course I wasn't a great dancer, but I loved to try.

E: Would that usually be popular music of the time, or...?

W: Popular music of the time, yes, it was. And the—they had just had, you know, a record player there, you know, that played records. And, so I would spend my time, all the time in the rec hall—well, not all the time. But, frankly, when I'd get a change to slip out... Now there was a lot of smooching and _____ (??) going on. You know that. They—you could slip out the rec hall, slip around, and you could do a little smooching and something or other, but it was hard to find a place that there wasn't already a couple of smoochers. Now, you don't tell nobody this.

E: No.

W: Nobody sees this, I hope.

E: Un-huh.

W: And other things to do, so that was my week, and mostly in the day time, in the morning from nine o'clock 'till ten thirty, and that nature, and you in the water. I was in the water and played around 'till we get real tired and the sun got bearing down. Then I'd leave there and go back to the—to the camp and go in, change from a bathing suit and then go—well, it's kind of like I had—was going with a girl and she'd go the same time I was and....

E: Yeah. Now, were you involved in sports activities? Did you participate—

W: Not too much.

E: Or just watch? Now the baseball diamond that was down here for many years—when did they finally tear the store down? Wasn't the store at that corner?

W: Yeah.

E: Tore it down and made a baseball diamond?

W: Yeah. That was tore down in, well I'd say '30... '36... '37. I'm not positive. '36, '37. In possibly '89 or '9 when they had a softball—they had a softball team up there for the employees here and, what it was, each department chose a team and, you know, well, we'd play the Cloth and the Card played the Spinning and that nature and so they would get, you know, fifteen boys from the weave shop and fifteen from the other department, and 'course you went through a trial there. I played one summer that I—played part of the _____ (??) summer. Frankly, it was too much work for me. I mean, I wasn't that much into it and they, and too, as you go to do it, they wanted you out there every evening for a couple of hours to practice and be prepared and stuff, and so I had other things to do.

E: Yeah. Now, did you say you started out on first or second shift?

W: I started on first shift. On the first—well, they didn't have two shifts when I started.

E: Okay. Then, when they added the second one, you stayed on the first.

W: Yes. Now I told you that I started as a grease monkey, then a cleaner of quills. First regular job was doffing cloth and then laying up warps, and then I went from that to weaving and, uh, I went in the service while I was a weaver. I came back from the service and, uh, the doctor had told me that at the time, you know, I had—I wanted to. I had a have a job that I didn't have to do a lot of standing and walking. So I went down to talk to Bill Williams, the superintendent, and I went down and talked to him and had the letter from the doctor and I told him I wanted to go back to work and I could do what I was doing and didn't have something else. He said, "I'll find something for you, Wallace." And, uh, well in a week's time, he sent for me. [He] told me to come down and told me he'd put me drawing in the drawing room. At that time, we drew in by hand with a _____ (??). And [he] put me on that. And I spent a while learning that and I just never was fast enough for that. I worked at it for, oh, eight or ten months and they took me off of that. They needed a person to, well, what it was, I would go around

each morning and see how many warps was going to run out that day and keep a record of how many warps was coming out. See, I went to work at six o'clock and I had to make a report how many warps would be out by the next morning at six o'clock. And you could look at a warp and think you know what you do and tell. Since I had been weaving and knew what warps—I could look at a warp and see if it was going to run out within the next twelve hours and, you know, or twenty-four hours. And, uh, but I kept a record of that. And I could take the loom number down, what type was on there, oh, they had a style numbers and keep that, and then I would take that to the office and fill it in. There was some more work to do with it. I worked with that for a year. And I don't know why for sure ____ they stopped that job for. [They] took that job and put it with another and then they took me off and I went in to running the elevator—my next job was just running the elevator—because I could sit on the elevator and not have to _____ (??). And I went to that. I was on the elevator for six to nine months and the supply room job came open and they come and asked me would I be interested in running the supply room. I said, "If it's more money, yes." They said it would be more money. And so I took—well, when I talked with Wendell Morris and he told me this job was open, asked me did I want it and said, "Yes. More money" because there was more money. And he said, "Well, it's yours if you want it." I said, "When do you want me to start work?" I think that was on a Friday. _____ (??) I went out there and it took me three months to learn that job on account of the book work to it. Now what the _____ (??) you had to keep a record of all the parts and to reorder when they got lot and stuff and the big—my big problem of the day was the report that I had to make out—each monthly report. 'Cause now, you'd have to make a report on all that come in and all that went out and this. So, it was...

E: You try to make that report while people were coming and asking for things all the time.

W: That's true. And when you've got \$100,000 inventory there and you've got to balance, well, I have worked, honest to goodness, I have worked as high as four to six hours trying to find three cents, trying to balance and you've got to balance now. You know, at the end, you've got to balance. Well, you send a report to Sylacauga. If it's not balanced, they going to send it right back to you. They don't do your work. They say, "You do it." And so, of course, you know, I had to do it. And I wouldn't send it 'till it did balance. And one thing there, three cents off, you couldn't take it out of your pocket and put it in there. You had to find it. That was that simple. You had to find it. And I made a monthly report and a quarterly report. And that quarterly report, now it was a humdinger. And that end-of-the-year report was a humdinger. You know, 'course, all jobs is they have their hard times and stuff but I had this one. One thing, I tried to be honest and tried to be as fair as I possibly could and stuff. Now, all the time that I was in the spider room, I went strictly by the rules and I got bawled out and chewed out and this and that by this one by when I accepted the job, I asked the superintendent particularly, you know, what to do and I was working directly under the superintendent because if I hadn't of been... if I—just like, department, just working in one department, that boss weaver told me to get things out of there, you know, without being charged to it, to that department, you know. And everything had to be charged to the department that got it and stuff.

E: Now, before I—this question gets away from me and this is...

W: Go ahead.

E: This is out in left field. I notice in reading through the early years, there was a Weave Room #1 and Weave Room #2. Now, does that mean that the mill was able to produce along two different lines, or...?

W: No, no. That part was, you read it in the *Sun*, didn't you?

E: Right, right.

W: All right now. At Sylacauga, Eva Jane, there was two weaving mills there, those two weaving.

E: This was bother here in Birmingham.

W: Oh, oh. #1 and #2 was downstairs and upstairs. Downstairs and upstairs. Now, downstairs was #1 and upstairs was #2.

E: Was it just simple that they were both making the same kind of cloth, but they just happened to be arranged that way?

W: Yeah. See, downstairs, well, at one time, now I say this, you had approximately five hundred and fifty-something looms downstairs and four, seventy-something or other upstairs. Four hundred, seventy-something upstairs. So you got, downstairs and up, now, they call one and two. Well, instead of saying downstairs and upstairs.

E: Yeah, yeah.

W: They say one and two.

E: Yeah, that's all they were doing then. And they would always try to get the two competing with one another, you know, for production quotas and so forth.

W: Right, right.

E: Let me... flip over right now.

[TAPE CUT OFF]

E: Now, before we get into too much into the post-war period, let me go back and pick up on a couple of things in the 30s and during the war itself.

W: Yeah.

E: First of all, I guess that the major quote event of the 30s was the strike of '34. Do you recall much about that?

W: Right. Yeah. Right. The, well, the Union was around in the area _____ (??) right across, right across here was a vacant lot. And they would put a speaker's platform out there and the Union man would come out to make a speech. And the people would gather then and they was out to make a speech. And the people would gather then and they was organizers, was close around and they, and that there was speeches and things. And there was a lot of them that after the speeches, they joined. I didn't. Well, for some reason or another, now, my daddy joined. They came on a strike, they struck. Now I guess if you've got a—something like forty-five percent of your [workforce]... [You] had to have the loom fixers to keep the looms running and the fixers all over. If they walk out, almost—the rest of them going to have to go because of them. They can't run the machinery or nothing like that. And it was most of the fixers that went out first. The rest of them had to follow. Now, a ten, fifteen, twenty percent of the rest of them might have belonged, but it wasn't all, and some of the fixers wasn't in there, but the majority left and so they did, too. And rather than to cause trouble because some of them was strong, I mean, strong in the Union, and they was going to strike. If everybody didn't come out, they was going to take clubs and beat them out of there.

E: Yeah.

W: Anyway. And so we all come out. And then they put the picket line up down there. And we was out for eleven weeks, out eleven weeks. During that eleven weeks now, to give you an example, everybody lived from payday to payday, and after the second payday, the food got low in the house and, now, at that time in particular, I had got a house after I went to work, worked six or seven months. I got a house in the village. And then I got my mother and my sister, which was staying with our grandmother, and I got them and brought them here and so we were staying together, you know, my brother and sister and so I was the supporter of the house and had to keep it. And when the pay stopped, I didn't have nothing. And the company knew, I don't know, I can't say how they did know for sure, but mostly the ones that was not Union, they, they come out. And Miss Malone, she had money from—that Mr. Comer had give her to help his people that was hurting for food. So, she came, you know, to see us, and told us over at the house, and so she gave us a little money. And 'course, now one thing there, we was living in a company house and 'course the water and electricity was free, and we, you know, that was, if it had been outside of the village with no pay, you'd have to pay the water bill and the light bill and all your rent, so you'd been throwed out—

E: For sure.

W: Right, so that was lucky. And Miss Malone, she helped—helped them and then she, being at that time what was our—I think I was nineteen or twenty years old or something of that nature, twenty-one, you know, real young.

E: Yeah, right.

W: You know, man and now knowing, and she told me what to do to go and get some help from the Red Cross. And, I went for that and everybody else that had to and I, they give me a something to fill out, I filled it out, they give me a card. And I was, I believe it was Wednesday or Thursday or something or another I did this and Monday I was to go downtown and a place down there at, and go to work. I guess

you heard how at that time, Texas had the dust storm and you read about and stuff about cattle would die, they would kill a lot of cattle. And to help the poor people and stuff, they—those cattle was beefed and so we was canning beef down there for people. And had a—my job, particular job was, I had a big steel vat that they put all this meat in, steam cook it. And I had a big paddle like a boat paddle and I had to stir that stuff in. And right over that steam coming from that, it was hot, pretty hot and stuff. And so I worked there for three or four weeks, and I guess it was probably four weeks. When we went back to—I don't know the yet, how positive the settlement on it, but anyway, they went back to work and mill was not Union and change—no change in salary, no change in nothing. You know—

E: Except working hours. Y'all were cut in half for a while, weren't you?

W: Right, right. We went to work , worked four hours a day for a long time and that's—that's the hurting part.

E: Yeah. Now you'd mentioned that you had joined the army. Was this right after Pearl Harbor or was this before that time?

W: Yes. No, I—Now, I didn't join. I was drafted. I'm going to keep the record straight. I was drafted. I got my call and I—I was a little bit surprised, me being a sole supporter of my mother and sister. But in the meantime, before that happened, my sister went to work. She had gone to work in the mill. She'd gotten old enough to work. And so, I—that might have been the reason I had to go. But, I was a little bit surprised. Of course, when I filled out, you know, the information, I had on there that I was the sole supporter of my mother and sister. But, they took me on in and I still didn't think, when I left here, they give me a day to report to Camp, you know, Fort McClellan give me a date. So, I was to be at the Grey Hound station at such and such in the morning and go from there to Fort McClellan. And I felt sure, in my mind wasn't hesitate. I didn't dream at all and I went to Fort McClellan and I thought, "When I get there, they'll send me back home." I was thinking [that] the whole time. But, when I got to Fort McClellan, in three days, I went to Atlanta, Fort Benning. I went to Fort Benning and went down there. It wasn't Atlanta. It was Fort Benning. And I, from there, Fort Benning, I don't know. I stayed here for a week and a half, something or other. Then I left there and went to California, started a base in California and went to Miami. And the reason they did that, at that time, there was saboteurs coming, that they'd caught in Florida and stuff, so they sent the outfit that I was with to do coastal guard duty. And—

E: were you Navy?

W: No, I was Army.

E: You were Army.

W: Army. But the coast was—it was patrolling the beaches.

E: Right. Right.

W: And they—so we went down to Miami. Miami was headquarters. And from Miami, we'd be assigned to different areas of the coast. Now, we had—

E: Now, at that particular time, you thought you had it made, probably.

W: Well, yeah. Well, this—we patrolled from, from Jacksonville, Florida to the Keys. We had for Jacksonville to the Keys. We had that whole Gulf beach to—some of our division had that much. And, the, we had the—our post duty—what was our post? We had the squad, twelve men would go to this area here and make—we had hotels and stuff. It was a hotel, and we would stay. Alright. At night—we only worked at night, after dark—at night, two, they was two in the Jeep that would patrol. We had—first we'd start in Jacksonville and they would go, you know, back a hundred miles to the next at Vera Beach, somewhere like that and all the way down. And we did that, now, you went to work, you go on duty tonight at six o'clock and come off the next day at six. I mean, the next morning at six. I—the next night, you didn't have to go out. You was off the next night. But the next you went back on.

E: Now, did you always stay at one section or did you see the whole coast?

W: Oh, at different... we changed, changed.

E: You—this is another one of those off-the-subject sorts of things. Do you recall some of the hotels you stayed in?

W: Yeah. Vera Beach Hotel was one at Vera Beach.

E: Did you stay at any in Palm Beach?

W: Palm Beach. I was in Palm Beach. We set up a little, oh, scout camp there. We wasn't in a hotel.

E: Didn't get to stay at the Breakers?

W: No, I'll give you—I will say this: that one of the large hotels there was took over by the, the spotters. You know, the Navy girls. And they would, that was their training center. At our camp there, we had forty men, something, in our came out there. And our officer that was in charge of us, somehow or another, he got to dating the officer that was in charge of the spotters up at this hotel. And that—then—I say in that class was probably two-fifty, three hundred girls. And they had, their basic training was there and then, they took their basic there and then they were shipped to the different parts of the world. Oh, I don't know for sure. I'd say six to eight weeks of basics and then when it was over for, I guess, recreation or something or another that they done with them, when they finished their training, they'd give them a party and a dance at the—and they had that great big old hotel there, extra-large ball room, you know, a big ball room and stuff. One, being there, you know Cougar. You know that orchestra leader that was—

E: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

W: He was down at Palm Beach playing for another hotel, something or another, and they—for—they got his orchestra over there to play for one of the nights of, for the party. Of course, it was done free, you know, that part. His orchestra played there and it was good.

E: Well, good.

W: Well, the—when our officer told us, you know, wanted us to go up to the hotel and to go there. And we would go to the dance and stuff and all the other. We slicked, all the G.I.s slicked up and went there. And they had certain times for it to start and everything and, anyway, we on this side, ball room—we're on this side and the girls were on the other side. These great big old wide doors and everything. At seven o'clock using—I don't remember exactly the time, but using that—seven o'clock, there doors opened up. Us G.I.s, we start walking in. Other side opened up and there's two hundred fifty start, they coming in that room. And when they come in, I, I don't know. They wasn't too bashful and we wasn't either. It wasn't but a minute or two, we was together. 'Course the band starts playing when the doors opened and all and we just start dancing. We, you know, danced 'till twelve. 'Course the part ended at twelve and so we had to leave out, starting at eleven-thirty or twelve. But that was one of the things that I had there.

E: It wasn't White Hall, was it?

W: Was it what?

E: White Hall? Some of the hotels—the Breakers, White Hall—

W: Breakers, I believe. But I'm not positive now.

E: The Breakers was on the Atlantic side of the island.

W: I'm not positive, but I believe it was that.

E: It looks like a Moorish castle, sort of thing.

W: Yeah.

E: Golf course between—

W: Right, right. There's a gold course there. And you know, in Palm Beach. It was then, they had a casino there.

E: Yeah.

W: With Bradley's Casino and...

E: The Beach Club?

W: Right. Uh-huh. As GIs, we was permitted to go, you know, anywhere. And the people, of course, those people down there are most all millionaires, you know that. I mean, it wasn't no _____ (??), but they brought a bunch of girls out to our camp one time to dance and Cougar come out there and played. And the Summer Club, something or other, you know, got some girls and brought them out there for us to dance with. 'Course, I say, it was twenty-five or thirty girls and, about thirty girls out there and we had a day room. Oh, it wasn't so big, but I'd say it was, you know, fifteen couples could dance easily on there, something like that. But it wasn't big enough, I mean, it wasn't hard for me. But they did. But, now, one lady. We all called her Grandma Great—she was a multi-millionaire and she

loved to do things for the G.I.s. And she would, anything at all that she could do, she wanted to do it. Now, she set up a, a campaign that fed the—if we was on duty, we'd go by there and they would fix us a lunch. If we was just up in town, you know, fooling around, we'd go in there and you could get a ham sandwich for ten cents, a big ham sandwich there for ten cents. And so, and that. And she, you know, this—and this, she set that up and paid most of it out, from her own pocket.

E: Well, by that time you knew that it couldn't last forever.

W: Right.

E: So, what—where was your next assignment?

W: Living—living from day to day. From Miami, I went to Van Doren, Mississippi. And when I got to Van Doren, see we was just one... we wasn't a division. We was just a battalion. And when we went from Miami to Van Doren, we joined in the division then. And when I got there, I knew that—that it was up. It, that it was going to be "bye-bye" there shortly, because when we got into division, we'd get in those division, you're going overseas. And it wasn't long and we went there and we stayed there at Van Doren three or four weeks and then from Van Doren, we went—we shipped out. We went to, well, went—shipped out from there, went on the train to California. And got to California, there wasn't no doubt in my mind that I was going to the Pacific. And, to tell you the truth, I wasn't too happy about it because at that time, the story come out of the, you know, the Death March, the Bataan Death March.

E: Yeah. Bataan.

W: Because the surrender and all. It come out. And I could tell myself going right in there what they was doing to the other G.I.s that they had. And I wasn't too happy about that. But, what could I do?

E: And so, how long were you in the Pacific before you were wounded?

W: Oh, let's see. Sixteen months. Fourteen or sixteen months. Fourteen.

E: So, you saw quite a bit before—

W: I believe that, I believe I—it was fourteen months, I believe, before—Yeah I had a... Well, I just... our division had the longest run on the front, on the front line then, than any other division in the Pacific for a good while. We was on the line eighty-something days. When you say "on the line," you were in the front, nothing between you and the enemy for all that time.

E: Yeah.

W: And I—the first time, I was baptized, baptism of fire, what you might call, under fire, it's always a shock and a surprise. You don't know, you don't, you just, you expect it part of the time, but you—then you keep going until you get to the, the minute you don't expect it and then it happens.

E: Now, when you returned, I noticed, you must have gotten married fairly soon thereafter. When did y'all get married?

W: I married before I went overseas.

E: Oh, before you went overseas.

W: Right. I, well on the first furlough from Miami. I stayed in Miami and my first furlough I had, I went in the service in '4—November of '42. Come back here first furlough, November '43. That's when we got married. And so, then, then my wife was together for ten days and then I shipped out and, well, the next time that we got to really started to living together was in the latter part of '48. Married in '43 and '48, the latter part of '48 was when we got back. Because, I—I was home one time when we married, I went back, I was shipped overseas, and I didn't get home. Now, I did get to come home after I got wounded for furloughs. Come home and stay fifteen days, thirty days, and have to go back, and go back to there, and another operation.

E: So, you were being hospitalized.

W: Right.

E: During this time.

W: Yeah, I was. See, I was hospital for thirty-four months. And, they—

E: Now, how had y'all met, you and your wife?

W: She was training at South Highland and her cousin, which was a friend of mine had _____ (??), and so I went to see him and he was on her floor that she was supervising, and...

E: One of the main reasons I wanted to ask that was, I noticed in most cases I come to know around here, mill workers ten to marry—marry mill worker, you know. People from right here in the village. And that was not your situation?

W: No, it wasn't the case with us. No. Un-huh. I went with several of the girls that worked here, but I did not—seemed like the love bug didn't bite me or something. It was her good timing. It wasn't nothing with them.

E: You said you finally got back here in '48, now, not long after that the mill houses were put up for sale.

W: Yeah.

E: Do you remember much about how that came about?

W: Yeah. The company in '5—the year '52 or something, or '51. I'm not positive there. But the company decided that the expense and upkeep of the house was too big. They was that old and it was up too big, so the company decided—now, one thing that I think helped: some company in Carlina had done this and this company seen the records of what, from that and they took it from there. They would be saving by selling the houses and all, you know, selling the houses.

E: Now, what was the arrangement? I mean, I don't—I don't imagine very many people had that much money.

W: No, well what—'course, you know, we had a credit union down here, and now Donald Comer himself, you talked to Mr. Driggers, which was his right hand man, and he told Mr. Driggers—now, what they decided that they'd sell the houses. They had surveyors to come out and make a survey of the houses and appraise them and all this when it got to the point of it. And so, Mr. Comer said, "Sell the houses for appraisal value, and you take a hundred—hundred dollars down and take the rest of the money, pay it six dollars—twelve dollars a month." That's the way you were paying for your house. If you didn't have a hundred dollars saved, [you] could go down there and sign the paper and Mr. Driggers let them have it. Now, of course, you had to pay that hundred dollars back to the credit union. And you was already paying—you was paying, it was twelve dollars, six dollars _____ (??), you know, you was paying that amount. And so there wasn't no change in what you was paying. You paid the same amount to purchase the house as you did for renting.

E: Yeah. But I do guess that, that electricity, for instance, was switched over, was it, or not?

W: Yeah, it was switched.

E: To private billing?

W: No. Oh, it was, I guess, I don't know, possibly... remember... it was almost a year before the first company come in and got—put in the meters.

E: Yeah.

W: It was almost a year before they come in. And, you know, well, we hadn't had meters here in the company years. And it was different,, and they—and it took them a good while to switch over from all the, you know, from the—

E: Yeah. Did almost everyone in the village take advantage of that situation?

W: I only—I only remember two families that did not take advantage of the—Lloyd Tew lived in 10 here, I believe it was 10. He was renting a house, each person that had the house rented had the opportunity to buy it. He was renting the house. But, before that, he had already had plans to buy him a house outside of the village. And, when this come up, well, he didn't have this house purchased at that time, so he moved in with his father-in-law until he got his house built. And so another person got the house. And I forgot the other one, but this one was close here.

E: Now, I remember visiting Wendy and Mary during the '50s and 60s, it seemed to me that, that the neighborhood was very well-kept during that period of time. Did it tend to improve or stay the same after people bought their homes, or...?

W: For a while, now, when the company owned the houses, they had strict rules and they had clean-up crews out in here to do it. At that time, I think Miss—Miss Malone was still in charge of the village and

she was real strict. She would make those tours through the village and if she found something that she didn't like, she had that person and got after the person about so-and-so is not right. And, you know, she was real strict. With the people that lived here, had such a habit that they had to do it for so long that they kept—kept it clean for after the house was theirs for three or four years. I mean, really because of that. And really, I'm trying to think, to the best of my recollection, it was after Miss Malone died, before—six months or a year or something—before they started changing and being slouchy and so it was after she left.

E: Uh-huh. Now, I hadn't even noticed the back of your house, but I assumed y'all boxed in the back porch. And so forth.

W: Well, let me show you here, we built a room back here, what we did.

[TAPE CUT OFF]

E: You had just mentioned what you had paid for the house.

W: I paid sixteen hundred dollars for a three-room house and a lot. I spent fifty-six hundred dollars repairing it.

E: Yeah.

W: Sixty-hundred dollars repairing it.

E: So the original price sounded good then, I guess.

W: You're right. Well, in a way, this house was give to me because I had lived here for years and paid the rent all the time, and then purchasing the house, paying the hundred dollars, I don't know for sure, but in eight or ten years, the house was deed. I got, you know, the deed.

E: The deed to the house. Now, y'all had a son who grew up here and, I guess, went to Cunningham.

W: He did.

E: On to Woodlawn.

W: Right, he did.

E: And he has continued the family textile tradition in a way.

W: Yes, my, well, he went to—finished Woodlawn. And when he was in Woodlawn, he started to work weekends at the mill doing clean-up jobs. The company's always good for young boys that whose family worked in there. They give them opportunities. And weekends, he worked, had his own free money. He finished Woodlawn and he went to Auburn. And for a while at Auburn, no, he didn't. He never worked while he was at Auburn except in the summer. Now, when he come back in the summer he could—would work through the summer. And his last year at Auburn, he got married. When he came back, he worked, got a job working.

E: Did he major in textiles at Auburn?

W: Right, he majored—no, he majored in Business Administration.

E: In Business.

W: Business Administration. It wasn't textiles, just business. The, we had—the company offered him, you know, to pay—help pay his tuition at Auburn. We didn't accept it because we had saved and we was prepared for that. And it was our thinking that if he accepted the scholarship that they would—

E: Feel an obligation.

W: ... obligation with it. And we didn't want the obligation. Wanted him to have his own freedom to choose what he wanted. And he worked down her for, I don't know, a year or so. And, when he first came back though, from Auburn, didn't have no, didn't have an opening that he, that he wanted and to do or something, and he went to job, hunting a job until he found one and went to work with Western Supermarket, sacked groceries for three or four months, about three months before—Mr. Jenkins asked me, he had—he had asked me what was Gene doing. And I told him he was a good job, looking for a job. And, he said, "Where is he working now?" I said, "Grocery store." [I] said, "It's a life." He said, "College graduate in a grocery store." I said, "Well, he's—he's got a family, he's married, he's going to do it." And so he told me to tell Gene to come see him. So, of course, I called him and the—the next couple of days, he went down here to interview and he, he give him a job and he worked a couple of months, then he put him as assistant foreman. So, he worked that for a year and they—the foreman on the job that was head top foreman, he retired. Gene was next in line for that position. Well, Sylacauga didn't see it that way, so they put another man in that job, put another man in that job. My son quit. He just quit. And so, I was a little disturbed about it, a little bit. But, he quit and it wasn't, oh, I'd say six weeks, he had a job with a clothing manufacturer and went to work and worked for nine months or another in that. And they put him as assistant plant manager and he worked there for a while. I don't know the time, I can't remember all the time, but it wasn't too long. And he got the plant manager's job.

E: Now, is he still here in Birmingham? Or another town?

W: Uh, he's lived at Moody _____ (??), out there above Leeds. Now, he works for Liberty Overalls at a plant in Ashland. He's manager—plant manager at Ashland at the Liberty plant that makes the overalls and pants.

[TAPE CUT OFF]

E (alone): After the interview had ended, we discussed several things, one of which was Donald Comer's paternalism, which Mr. Armstrong saw as, indeed, different from the other members of the Comer family. For instance, he pointed out that Donald the third was never seen in the village, and really

Donald Jr. hardly ever had made the scene. He agreed in part with my statement that J. Craig Smith seemed to be the closest to Donald Comer in his visits to the village and knowing the people, but even there, it was much less than what Donald Comer had done. As he pointed out, Uncle Donald as he called it, would go through the village constantly. He was only in the office when he had to be to sign papers or whatever. He spent the rest of the time with members of the village. He told about one of his neighbors who was two houses down who was injured in a mill accident one time, broke his leg, worked in the machine shop and that Donald Comer had immediately dispatched Miss Malone to check on the man after Donald after him within a week of the accident, and that Miss Malone checked on him weekly until he was able to go back to work about two months later. As Mr. Armstrong recounted the incident, Mr. Comer came in and told the man that he didn't want him to want for anything, that he wanted him during that period of recuperation to have anything that he would have ordinarily had—had he been paid full time. He also pointed out that Donald Comer even paid the Scout Masters for their work with the Boy Scout troop in Avondale village, and that during the time when Mr. Armstrong's son was a boy scout that Jay Neighbors, a man who lived up the street from him, was the scout master. Also, one other thing that came up was the fact that in talking to Jack Breed at church Sunday morning, Mr. Armstrong had discovered that Avondale Mills was in the process of doing away with all of their weaving operations, which of course means the closing down of two sections of mills in Sylacauga, the Pell City Mill, known for its making of denim, and marks the end of it indeed turns out to truly [be] a major part of Avondale's work throughout the years, and that from now on, they will only be making yarns.

[END OF INTERVIEW]